

‘You cannot show me’: Two Tudor Coronation Processions, Shakespeare’s King Henry VIII and the Staging of Anne Boleyn

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Of all Shakespeare’s plays, King Henry VIII has the greatest number of examples of dramatised pageantry, and the play as a whole could be said to be formally structured around these visual spectacles. As well as a dramatisation of the coronation entry of Anne Boleyn, the play frequently has its noble characters entering in a processional form, most notably for the scenes containing Buckingham’s execution speech (II. i. 53-136), that of Queen Katherine’s trial (II. iv.), and finally for the christening of the baby Elizabeth (V. iv.).¹ The central procession among these is the coronation of ‘Anne Bullen’ in IV. i., the stage directions for which are extraordinarily detailed in the context of the Shakespearean canon. This is evidenced by their reproduction in full:

The Order of the Coronation.

1. A lively flourish of trumpets.
2. Then, two judges.
3. LORD CHANCELLOR, with purse and mace before him.
4. Choristers singing. Music.
5. MAYOR OF LONDON, bearing the mace. Then GARTER, in his coat of arms, and on his head he wore a gilt copper crown.
6. MARQUESS DORSET, bearing a scepter of gold, on his head a demi-coronal of gold. With him, the EARL OF SURREY, bearing the rod of silver with the dove, crowned with an earl’s coronet. Collars of Esses.

7. DUKE OF SUFFOLK, in his robe of Estate, his coronet on his head,
bearing a long white wand, as High Steward. With him, the DUKE OF
NORFOLK, with the rod of marshalship, a coronet on his head. Collars of
Esses.

8. A canopy, born by four of the Cinque-ports, under it the
QUEEN, in her robe; in her hair, richly adorned with pearl,
crowned. On each side her, the BISHOPS OF LONDON and WINCHESTER.

9. The old DUCHESS OF NORFOLK, in a coronal of gold,
wrought with flowers, bearing the queen's train.

10. Certain ladies or countesses, with plain circlets of gold without flowers.

Exeunt, first passing over the stage in order and
state, and then, a great flourish of trumpets.

While this does not follow the actual order of the procession as it appears in Holinshed, Shakespeare's reputed source, it is possible to imagine the impression that such a grand display must have made on a contemporary audience at the Globe.² Indeed, discussions of the nature of this impression have formed the basis of much criticism of the play,³ as is demonstrated by R. A. Foakes's description of 'the gay coronation procession of Anne accompanied by the splendour of coronets, crowns, sceptres, and rich costumes,' an event that 'is reported in terms not of her satisfaction, but of the joy of the people.'⁴ This is a reference to IV. i., where, according to 'three Gentlemen,' much of the crowd which attended the coronation procession was made up of common people, the third Gentleman stating that he was 'stifled / With the mere rankness of their joy' (IV. i. 58). He continues in this vein,

saying that in her chair of state, Anne was ‘opposing freely / The beauty of her person to the people’ (IV. I. 67-8). He underlines also the fact that the crowd was large, for

... when the people
Had the full view ... such a noise arose
As the shrouds make at sea in a stiff tempest,
As loud, and to as many tunes (IV. I. 69-76).

Though they are ‘rank,’ these commoners are regarded as having been impressed by the spectacular nature of this display, and are seen to be entirely delighted by this public spectacle. Anne Boleyn’s actual coronation procession evoked a somewhat different response from her audience however.

Rather than spectacular, a witness to Anne’s coronation procession in 1533 found that ‘the event had been cold, meagre, uncomfortable, and dissatisfying to everybody.’⁵ This witness was a foreigner--Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador, writing (in French) to Emperor Charles V--and thus his evidence needs to be read with a good deal of scepticism. However, it is pertinent evidence, for it states that the response to the passing of Anne Boleyn was not as reported in the play, but was rather defined by the fact that ‘the crowd stood mute.’⁶ Sydney Anglo reproduces a section of Chapuys’ report, which he believes ‘gives a wonderfully jaundiced description of the whole affair’ (Anglo, 259). He writes:

Despite the English custom of making obeisance before the
King and Queen on their entry, and of crying ‘Dieu gard le roy,
Dieu gard la royne’, there was nobody, says the observer, who
greeted them in this way. And when one of the Queen’s
servants asked the Mayor to order the people to give the

customary welcome, 'lequel luy respondit que ne seroit contraindre les cuoeurs de gens et que le roy mesme ne seroit que fere'. Moreover, the coincidence of the letters H. and A. interlaced, signifying Henry and Anne, painted everywhere as decoration, was seized upon derisively 'par interjection comique ha, ha, ha'--such was the slight esteem in which the new Queen was held by the populace. Anne's personal appearance, likewise, did not escape the writer's scourge. The litter in which she rode, he says, was so low that the ears of the last mule in the team showed above the back of the Queen's seat, so that she seemed to have two sharp horns, 'que plusieurs en rioient'. The crown, he continues, ill became her and made her look very ugly, the more so since, as he later points out, she was scrofulous--'une ecrouelle la rendoit monstreuse' (Anglo, 259).

Part of Chapuys' report appears in the Calendar of State Papers, where he states that 'the number of the spectators ... was very considerable, but all looked so sad and dismal that the ceremony seemed to be a funeral rather than a pageant....'⁷ In the context of the actual historical event, Shakespeare's dramatic representation begins therefore to read somewhat differently. Rather than being overwhelmed by the spectacular nature of the actual event, the crowd are seen to be 'mute,' and 'sad and dismal,' finding the procession of the impending Queen displeasing rather than joyous. The problematic aspect of the entire coronation procession would seem to be the fact of Anne Boleyn herself, and the ambiguous position she

occupied. This ambiguity is made clear in the way in which Anne was represented in the procession that marked the accession to the throne of her daughter, Elizabeth I.

The pre-coronation procession of 1559, which took place the day before the ceremony marking Elizabeth's accession, was documented at the time in a specially commissioned description credited to Richard Mulcaster.⁸ In it, Mulcaster describes the route taken by the participants of the procession, as well as the pageant devices which were performed, dramatic interludes on specially erected scaffolds, each taking place as the Queen reached them. These theatrical performances took the form of various allegorical representations of the impending Queen, dramatising her perceived functions in various ways. The shows were colourful and impressive, as well as propagandist. There was music, bells pealing, cannons intermittently firing, and the streets were lined, Mulcaster informs us, with the Queen's 'most loving People,'⁹ cheering without pause. The first thematic pageant of the procession followed an initial welcoming and, placed at the upper end of Gracious Street had the underwriting of the legitimacy of Elizabeth's claim to the throne as its aim. Mulcaster describes it in detail, saying that the stage 'extended from thone syde of the streate to thother,' decorated with battlements 'containing three portes, and over the middlemost was avaunced severall stages in degrees' (Mulcaster, 41). This pageant, entitled 'The uniting of the two Howses of Lancastre and Yorke' presented, upon a lower stage, personages representing Henry VII and his wife Elizabeth. The former, from the House of Lancaster, was enclosed in a red rose, and the Queen, from the House of York, was enclosed in a white rose. Each of them was 'Royally crowned, and decently apparailled as apperteineth to Princes, with Sceptours in their hands, and one vawt surmounting their heades, wherein aptly were placed two tables, eche containing the title of those two Princes' (Mulcaster, 41). This

marking ensured that the audience was aware of who were being represented in this display, and the description of their appearance demonstrates the desire to present a realistic simulation of these two historical figures. Furthermore, these two figures joined hands over the 'ring of matrimonie,' and 'Out of which two Roses sprang two branches gathered into one, which were directed upward to the second stage... (Mulcaster, 41). Upon this higher platform two actors representing King Henry VIII and his Queen, Anne Boleyn, were placed, who were likewise dressed and decorated, and who also wore a sign upon which their names were written. From their seat yet another branch extended upward to the third and highest stage, upon which a figure representing Queen Elizabeth herself sat, 'nowe our most dradde Soveraigne Ladie, crowned and apparalled as thother Prynces were' (Mulcaster, 41). A verbal explanation of the entire pageant, in verse form, was recited by a child as Elizabeth reached it. As well as this vocal explanation, from which only Elizabeth and those very close to the stages would have benefited, 'all emptie places ... were furnished with sentences concerning unitie,' and to make the final point, 'the hole Pageant [was] garnished with Redde Roses and White... (Mulcaster, 41). Mulcaster describes the pageant in much detail, informing us of the genealogical links made both between the two houses, and between Henry VII and Elizabeth, Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and Elizabeth herself, the impending Queen. The desire of the pageant's creators is fairly clear, casting Elizabeth in terms of a legitimate heir to the throne, a throne that, from Henry VII through Henry VIII, represents national unity, peace and stability. At length Mulcaster valorises Henry VII's wife Elizabeth as having helped set this process in motion by joining the two warring houses of Lancaster and York together by marrying Henry, stating furthermore that the impending Queen Elizabeth would also maintain this as 'unitie was the ende whereat the whole devise shotte...' (Mulcaster, 42). The fate of the nation is therefore regarded as being secure due to the fact

that the impending monarch has the same name and qualities as the earlier queen. However, it is a connection based in absence and well as presence, as is made clear by examining the verses recited for Elizabeth as she reached this pageant device:

The two Princes that sit under one cloth of state,
The Man in the Redde Rose, the Woman in the White,
Henry the VII. and Quene Elizabeth his Mate,
By ring of marriage as Man and Wife unite.

Both heires to both their bloodes, to Lancastre the Kyng,
The Queene to Yorke, in one the two Howses did knit;
Of whom as heire to both, Henry the Eighth did spring,
In whose seat, his true heire, thou Quene Elisabeth doth sit.

Therefore as civill warre, and fuede of blood did cease,
When these two Houses were united into one,
So now that jarrs shall stint, and quietnes encrease,
We trust, O noble Quene, thou wilt be cause alone (Mulcaster, 42-3).

The absence is of course clear; of all those represented on the pageant stages, in the verses it is only the figure of Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother, who is not mentioned. As Susan Frye notes, the staging of Anne Boleyn, coupled with her verbal absence, demonstrates an enormous discomfort with having to include her representation at all.¹⁰ Boleyn is, in a sense, excluded in the same moment she is included. Her presence reminds us that the event of 1559 was not in fact Elizabeth's first coronation procession, her mother having been six months pregnant with her on the occasion of her own coronation entry in 1533. Boleyn's

allegorical presence at the 1559 procession calls to mind the silent response to her own procession in 1533, a response which sprang from her celebration as a chaste, Protestant heroine coinciding with her being heavily pregnant. This was further compounded by the fact that Henry's first wife was still living and the marriage between the two had not been sanctioned by the Pope. Here Anne Boleyn was lauded as the bringer of a golden age, as virtue personified, as virginal yet fruitful, precisely those (contradictory) properties for which Elizabeth was being celebrated in her own procession. Perhaps what this genealogical tableau articulated more than anything else was the precise opposite of what was desired: the very tenuousness of Elizabeth's claim to the throne. Henry VIII's will of 1546 had denied Elizabeth's legitimacy, as had the Second Act of Succession of 1536. There is a sense that in fact this particular representation of Anne Boleyn could therefore have instigated many doubts and anxieties in the contemporary audience, not least ones regarding religion, peace, unity, and stability. For whatever the pageant creators wanted the message to be, one thing is certain: the contemporary audience would have been aware of the real events surrounding Anne Boleyn, and would have been aware of her ambiguous status, both as an historical and an allegorical figure. It is possible that many in the audience would have viewed the message of this present pageant with a good deal of scepticism. This scepticism would have been supported by the fact that ideas of a golden age embodied in a new monarch had been seen before, 25 years previously, in the same streets, and had been seen to be misplaced (Anne did not last long as Queen in any case). This pageant's attempts to ensure that 'quietnes might be mainteyned, and all dissention displaced' (Mulcaster, 43), may have prompted a reading based in real (past and) current events that would have produced, conversely, divisive meanings. Thus this staging of Anne Boleyn could indeed, have given rise to interpretations very different from the official meanings desired. Such a response could also have been

evoked by Shakespeare's subsequent staging of Anne Boleyn, as is emphasised by evidence contemporary with the performance of the play.

Both in the coronation procession which Shakespeare dramatises in King Henry VIII, and in the famous final scene in which Cramner predicts a golden age to come with Elizabeth as Queen, Anne Boleyn's presence can be considered problematic. In the coronation scene, as in her representation in Elizabeth's pre-coronation pageant, she is present but silent. In the final baptism scene, in which Henry, Elizabeth and indeed James I are praised and linked with a prosperous and peaceful England, she, the mother of the child, is entirely absent. Although she is, therefore, central to both dramatised events, her presence is partially or wholly occluded. In an earlier scene however (I. iv.), in which she is first introduced in the play, Anne's problematic position takes on a very real significance, as it was during a performance of this very scene in 1613, that the Globe caught fire and burnt down. Interestingly, Anne is the last person to speak before the 'chambers [are] discharg'd,' the precise event which caused the roof to catch fire and the theatre to burn. In a strange coincidence, given what has already been said, the words Anne speaks directly before this fateful event are resonant. In a response to Lord Sands which seems to capture the problematic nature of the staging of her character, Anne says; 'You cannot show me' (I. iv. 48). Yet Shakespeare did show her, and the ostentatious nature of this representation gave rise to the most important piece of contemporary evidence regarding the burning down of the Globe, evidence which is also a fruitful source for an examination of the staging of Anne Boleyn.

In an oft quoted letter concerning a performance of the above mentioned scene of Shakespeare's King Henry VIII, Sir Henry Wotton, poet and courtier, makes a controversial statement. The letter, dated 2nd July, 1613, reads as follows:

The Kings Players had a new play called All is true, representing some principal pieces of the reign of Henry VIII, which was set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty, even to the matting of the stage; the Knights of the Order with their Georges and garters, the Guards with their embroidered coats, and the like: sufficient in truth within a while to make greatness very familiar, if not ridiculous. Now, King Henry making a masque at Cardinal Wolseys house, and certain chambers being shot off at his entry, some of the paper, or other stuff, wherewith one of them was stopped, did light on the thatch, where being thought at first but an idle smoke, and their eyes more attentive to the show, it kindled inwardly, and ran round like a train, consuming within less then an hour the whole house to the very grounds.¹¹

The controversial statement to which I refer comes in the middle of the letter with Wotton's reference to 'greatness' being made 'ridiculous,' a statement that seems to contradict those critics referred to earlier who find the pageantry of the play so ideologically successful. A sign of the controversial nature of this statement as far as this kind of critical approach is concerned is its appearance in the Arden edition of King Henry VIII where, in his introduction, R. A. Foakes reproduces the letter minus this very sentence (Foakes, xxviii). It is included (without comment) when the letter is reproduced in full in the appendices, but its

absence in the more prominent introduction is interesting (Foakes, 180). As previously stated, for many critics the pageantry referred to by Wotton has been represented as both glorious in a visual sense and spectacular in a normative sense. However, at least as far as Wotton was concerned, such spectacular display upon the stage had precisely the opposite effect, the representation of monarchy effectively demystifying the existing hierarchical structure, demonstrating it to be no more than the familiar clothed in splendour. As such, members of the aristocracy are perceived as mere ordinary mortals who cover their ordinariness with splendour in order to produce the impression of greatness and divinity. Magnificent display and costume are thus mobilised in a normative manner, and, according to Henry Wotton, not only fail in their ideological desire, but in fact work against this desire and destroy it. If Henry Wotton's claim is opened out to include those to whom such a spectacle made 'greatness ridiculous,' a different way of reading the play becomes possible. For, if Wotton, a diplomat in the courts of both Elizabeth and James, could read these representations of greatness as ridiculous, then such an interpretation was, as Scott Wilson says, "available to anyone who watched it."¹² A consideration of the report concerning the contemporary reception of Anne Boleyn's actual procession, gives added credence to the possibility that Wotton found greatness being made ridiculous in the play precisely because it was staging the same Anne Boleyn. If the audience for the actual procession is considered, Wotton's discomfort becomes clearer, in the sense that he shared the displeasure of the 1533 audience. And if he shared it, it is quite possible that much of the audience for the play felt the same way.

The ambiguity that Anne Boleyn embodied is more clearly represented in the light of the historical fact of her own actual coronation. Wotton's apparent discomfort with

Shakespeare's representation of the events of Henry VIII's divorce was perhaps due to the fact that Anne Boleyn was an historical figure who, it is possible to say, did indeed make greatness familiar, if not ridiculous. The essential problem of Anne in the play is the same as that which defined her own actual coronation; she is being crowned queen when the queen is still alive, and is carrying an illegitimate, legitimate heir. This problem extends beyond her as an individual in her actual coronation procession, her representation in that of her daughter and the dramatisation of the event of 1533 by Shakespeare. For, the fact of her ambiguity infects greatness around her, and makes it ridiculous also. This is attested to by the realisation that 'lequel luy respondit que ne seroit contraindre les cuoeurs de gens et que le roy mesme ne seroit que fere' (Anglo, 259). Thus, by the mere staging of Anne Boleyn, the spectacular nature of the procession is undermined, traditional notions of hierarchy and heredity are questioned and demystified, and all greatness is rendered familiar to a contemporary audience, if not ridiculous.

Notes

¹William Shakespeare, King Henry VIII, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1986) II. i. 53-136.

²Raphael Holinshed, Chronicles Of England, Scotland, and Ireland, 6 Vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1807) 4: 930-933.

³See, for example: E. M. W. Tillyard, 'Why did Shakespeare write Henry VIII,' Critical Quarterly 3:1 (Spring 1961): 22-27; G. Wilson Knight, The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays (1947; London: Methuen, 1985); Frank Kermode, 'What is Shakespeare's Henry VIII About?' Durham University Journal 9 (1948): 48-55; Marjorie H Nicolson, 'The Authorship of Henry the Eight,' PMLA 37 (1922): 484-502. Other important studies include Frances Yates, Shakespeare's Last Plays: A New Approach (London: Kegan & Paul, 1975) 65-84; Peter L. Rudnytsky, 'Henry VIII and the Deconstruction of History,' Shakespeare Survey 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 43-57; Howard Felperin, 'Shakespeare's Henry VIII: History as Myth,' Studies in English Literature 6 (1966): 225-46; Camille Wells Slight, 'The Politics of Conscience in All is True (or Henry VIII),' Shakespeare Survey 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 59-68; Alexander Leggatt, Shakespeare's Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays (London: Routledge, 1988): 214-237.

⁴R. A. Foakes, introduction, King Henry VIII, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1986) xv-lxvii: lii.

⁵Sydney Anglo, Spectacle, Pageantry And Early Tudor Policy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 259.

⁶R. Malcolm Smuts, 'Public Ceremony And Royal Charisma: the English Royal Entry In London, 1485-1642,' The First Modern Society: Essays In English History In Honour Of Lawrence Stone, eds. A. L. Beier, David Cannadine and James M. Rosenbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 65-93: 75-76.

⁷CSP (Spanish) (1531-1533) 2: 700. This same excerpt appears in James Gairdner, ed., Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII (London: Longman & Co, 1882) 6: 244. The (brief) official version of the coronation according to the Corporation of London appears in Repertory 9: f. 1b.

⁸Richard Mulcaster, The Passage Of Our Most Drad Sovereigne Lady Quene Elyzabeth Through The Citie Of London To Westminster The Daye Before Her Coronacion London 1558-9, John Nichols, The Progresses And Public Processions Of Queen Elizabeth 1, 3 Vols. (1823; New York: AMS Press, 1977) 1: 38-60.

⁹They are described as such many times in Mulcaster's pamphlet.

¹⁰Susan Frye, Elizabeth 1: The Competition For Representation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 33.

¹¹Logan Pearsall Smith, The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) 2:

32-33. The original letter is in Henry Wotton, Reliquiae Wottoniae (London: Marriot, Bedel & Garthwait, 1672) 425-6.

¹²Scott Wilson, Cultural Materialism (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995) 128.